

**Education Committee
Wednesday, March 15, 2023**

House Bill 6881: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators - Support

Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and members of the Education Committee:

I offer the following testimony in support of HB 6881, An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators:

My name is Erika Webb, I have an Associates Degree as a Disability Specialist. I've worked as a paraprofessional on and off since I was 18, in three different districts. Almost every job I've ever had has been in a caring or educational profession of one sort or another, and all have involved ensuring that children with disabilities are accommodated and included. This requires a huge amount of empathy, quick thinking, and problem solving, and more than a few instances of getting pummeled by my charges.

Currently, I work for Groton Public Schools as an elementary school special education paraprofessional at North East Academy. I go by Miss Webb to the kiddos. I smile a lot, can project my voice across the playground, make it a point to never lie to kids about things that matter, and I keep my promises to them. Very recently, I was assigned as a one on one, but for much of the year I was an "enhanced" para; meaning I was assigned to three students in a second grade class (7-8 year olds). Most paras are these days; we don't have the people to not be. Fortunately, all my kiddos are in one class, but I've had to jump back and forth between classrooms before. I was with one of them for part of first grade as well, and I know many of the students in that grade, too.

My day starts at 8:40 AM. This is when I'm allowed to clock in and grab a radio, if there are any. Many paras come in early to help their classroom teachers. That is certainly something I have done. And, when needed, I will stay late; because if I don't have things together before the kids get there the next morning, my day is exponentially harder.

I say my good mornings, get a quick update from the classroom teacher if there are crises brewing, and grab the classroom radio if there weren't any in the office. At 8:45 AM, I go outside where the kids come to play after getting off the bus. I say good morning to as many kids as I can. For some kids, they don't hear their names in a positive way or have people glad to see them outside of school, so I do my best to give that to them.

I make \$15 an hour.

I often am not just responsible for getting my second graders inside, but all three classes of them. About 64 seven and eight year olds follow me inside because we don't have enough people to maintain the IEP ratios AND ensure the rest of the classes have an adult. But I can project my

voice well, and my pink hair makes me an easy figure to follow. As I lead the parade, a few kids from higher and lower grades smile and wave at me and I make sure I smile and wave back, but my head is on a swivel because in the group I'm leading, in addition to my three, there are a few others we just don't have the people to give a para to, and the pushing and chaos of a large moving crowd of students can make behavior unpredictable.

I usually have kids from my class excited to share stories about the evening they had when they got home, there's always a story about newly loose or wiggling or lost teeth. I listen to all of this while watching for disruptions in the moving mass of children that could indicate problems arising. If I see a child coming in upset or crying, I make sure to quietly find out why and relay that info to the classroom teacher. I make sure the kids get their stuff put in lockers; because they like to dawdle, it's become a running joke that if they take too long I tell them that they're getting older. "Ope, you're 13 now kiddo, better hurry up; child, you just turned 45, how's your retirement fund?"

Speaking of retirement funds, I don't have one. I'm 37, and I live paycheck to paycheck. I *dream* about my future all the time, but I try not to *think* about it.

Amidst the morning hubbub, my three main fellas arrive, one fairly quietly, with his current passion project under his arm. One like a hurricane of dysregulation, jacket and backpack akimbo, and the third always smiling and busy, bossing around other students and trying to sass me into my place.

I check in with each of them. The quiet one gets a smile, and a question about what he's made from pipe cleaners. I've learned more about dinosaurs, reptiles, amphibians, and birds from him than in the rest of my life combined, and I grew up with The Land Before Time movies.

The hurricane, I take a second to tell that I'm glad to see him, remind him to calm his body, and listen to outrageous stories (I'm really not sure if he understands differences between fact and fiction). I remind him that he doesn't need to try and impress me, I like him the way he is.

The third one tells me not to help him with his backpack, then gets mad when I don't. He tells me about what he had, or is having, for dinner. Again, I'm not sure how reliable a narrator this child is, but I'm glad to listen when he wants to talk to me. He needs to be corralled into the classroom, but we're at the point in our relationship that he has some trust that when I assure him his familiar faces will come as they always do, he believes me.

When we sit in the morning circle, my three guys do it on their terms. The quiet one sits at his table, the hurricane squirms unbearably but tries to join with the class, and my third guy wanders, but often prefers to sit on my lap. He doesn't like to cuddle, but he likes to be squeezed. Mornings are easier because no one is overwhelmed on a sensory or social level yet, but I'm aware of a thousand sensory microaggressions as a consequence of training, experience, and who I am as a person. A child may be unable to sit still because the carpet isn't right in this spot in the circle, someone else's shoes are laced wrong and they don't know how to fix it so they fidget with them, and there's some ambiguous noise from a device of some sort. I fix the shoes, and try a cushion for the squirming child. The teacher can't hear the device noise, and I can't find the source.

I sit in a short, molded plastic classroom chair because if I'm on the floor too long my feet fall asleep and I can't run or respond if I can't walk. This is what I do during lockdown drills too; I don't want to struggle from the floor if an intruder gets through the door; I want to be able to fully tackle them. I've also planned, if it's not a drill, to move the heavy chromebook cart in front of the door and put the brakes on. It'll provide some cover from gunfire and slow down getting the door open, maybe giving us enough time to go out the window.

Again, I make \$15 an hour.

After the morning meeting, we move to reading. The quiet guy is easily at grade level but sometimes refuses to read anything except nonfiction on his current fixation. The hurricane is so overwhelmed with even modified materials that he just sits staring until an adult can help him interpret what might as well be non-Euclidean geometry. In another class, I would be sitting with him, coaching, coercing, and cheering each small victory. I would try different ways of presenting the material to see if something clicks, see if different forms of support would yield better or worse results. If I was a one to one, with any of them, I might have time to collect data in a tangible way.

But the third fella is so far below grade level that I need to select materials from the milk crates, folders, and boxes from the special ed teacher, sit beside him, and explain things in tiny steps. If he earns his break, I have time to go help the hurricane. But that's an "if". The third has a lot of behaviors that take a lot of attention. Again, having time to collect and upload data, and training for what to collect, would be valuable for everyone.

We don't have a formal behavior intervention plan for him, so the classroom teacher and I have cobbled together things that work. A cornerstone of my Disability Specialist degree is an understanding of behavior, what causes it, and ways to change it. This can be recognizing when a child hasn't had enough sleep, or is having trouble at home, or it can be seeing sensory triggers in the environment and removing them, or ensuring adults are consistent in all aspects to reduce anxiety in children. It requires knowing the kids you work with very well.

I would love to talk to parents and guardians about this stuff at Planning and Preparation Team (PPT) meetings, but I'm not allowed to be there unless parents request it. Most parents don't know they have the right to request that. But the fact that the person who spends, on a given day, five and a half hours a day with a given child isn't automatically given a place at the table gives weight to my suspicion that paras aren't seen as professionals.

On most days, I try not to spend all morning hovering next to the third fella; he only has so much tolerance for getting directions per adult, and I don't want to burn through all my goodwill in the morning. But he likes to be with me, so he follows me around as I try to work with my other two guys, and usually as I end up touching base with each kid in the class. Not usually for major stuff; it's for tying shoes, giving bathroom permission, being asked if I want to hear what they wrote, telling me a seemingly random story. I want to say, "Yes" and listen to each of them, so I promise to listen at lunch or recess.

Snack time is a low key scary time of day for me. I have a number of food allergies, the most severe are on contact alone. Seven and eight year olds aren't the neatest people; crumbs and messy fingers are a given, or they spill their pudding, or sneeze while eating their chocolate chip muffins. But there's not enough staff for me to be out of the room while this happens. So I wash my hands, move away from offending snacks, and wait.

Health insurance through the district would cost me an entire paycheck *per month* and my deductible would be a joke. Because I make so little, \$15 an hour, about 32 hours a week, I qualify for reduced cost health insurance, which covers most of my prescriptions, but not all. It covers some of my doctors but doesn't allow me to seek meaningful care for the worst of my issues. So being daily exposed to something that could put me in the hospital or keep me out of work is reasonably frightening.

After I get right with any God listening during snack time, there's phonics. Again, I'm tied to the third fella, because he is so far below grade level, and so easily distracted, that I can't just set him up and go see the other two.

If I'm lucky, one of the available building subs comes in to work with the two that I can't get to. There are a few classrooms where building subs bop between to try and cover all the kids who are missing paras. But with building subs, who are wonderful, there is no way to be consistent. And kids who need paras need consistency, they need a touchstone in their day, somewhere to fall back to when they're struggling. A familiar face when they're in crisis.

Building subs also make about \$30 an hour. I make \$15. We are doing the exact same job. But there are so many openings for paras unfilled that those are the places building subs are needed. From a financial standpoint, this is a waste of resources; from a human resources perspective, this is a waste of resources and terrible for para morale. I don't think it's going too far out on a limb to say that if you can't find people to work for the amount being offered, you need to sweeten the pot, and if employee retention is important, ensure loyalty is remunerated.

After phonics, the kids have specials. They go right from specials to lunch and recess, so they always have to grab all the stuff they need; lunch boxes, coats, water bottles. Specials are...interesting for my fellas. The quiet one will go in, but often refuses to participate. He's not usually disruptive, just non-compliant. But I can't overstate how much of an improvement this is from years past. The hurricane can't stop moving, can't focus on directions, and gets in trouble for it. He breaks my heart. He reminds me of someone who's always on a treadmill going too fast, then getting yelled at for not being able to hold on.

The third...is hit or miss. Lately he's been very willing to go to specials, but for a lot of the year, he would just refuse. So we'd sit in the hallway, I'd get in his way so he wouldn't wander too far, then he'd beat me with a closed fist and flop all over me and yell for me to "give him space." He'd take off his shoes and socks and throw them at me, then get mad when I wouldn't give them back.

I used to call for assistance, but realistically, we're at the point where I know how long his antics last before he becomes compliant.

Now that he participates and enters the classrooms, I'm able to do my job and make the lessons/projects accessible for my fellas (and help the rest of the class as well).

The quiet one and the third have lunch bunch, so after specials I radio to see if the "restaurant" is open and let them walk down together. I get the remaining class to line up in lunch order; I taught them to use ASL letters to indicate where they should be in line so they can be pretty self-sufficient about it. I stay with the rest of the class...and the other second graders...and the first grade...and kindergarten...during lunch. There are usually one of us per class.

If snack time is when I prepare my soul, the cafeteria is when I personally walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

The hurricane doesn't do well in the cafeteria, over-stimulated, forgetting to eat, somehow ending up on the floor every time I turn around. So I hover near him, but realistically, any kid with a raised hand is someone who I may need to assist. I wear foldable scissors on my lanyard so I can quickly open packages. The kids are always *very* impressed.

Despite the health risks, lunch is one of my favorite times of the day; I get to make my hug run. An entire kindergarten class waves to me, but stays in their seats because I promised them that if they stay in their seats and wave, I'll come give them hugs. This started with two little girls, one of whom is repeating the grade and knew me from last year, the other just loves to hug. They would chase me through the cafeteria, which is what started my bargain. But word has spread that if you wave your arms, Miss Webb will give you a hug.

On my way, a few first graders I was with when they were in kindergarten have gotten in on the bargain.

Here's my secret; I would hug them even if they leaped off the table into my arms, I would just remind them about the deal and not give them my top tier hugs until they did. I don't believe affection should be conditional because every single child in that school is in a unique place in Maslow's Hierarchy. Some haven't heard their names in a positive way, some are food insecure, some are struggling to make friends, some haven't slept, some have been moved in with a foster family, some have parents who've gone to jail, some have been hit or told they're not wanted. Some are safe and clean but struggle being away from their families or are riddled with insecurity or as one of my young ladies in class puts it, "is having very big feelings." Every child needs something to help them reach self-actualization and sometimes just knowing Miss Webb or the adults with them day in, day out at school are there to hug them when they want it, is enough to help them take another step towards that.

Much of what I do in the lunchroom is make sure the kids are eating, not bouncing off the walls, getting replacements for food that's fallen on the floor, and handing out bathroom passes that always come back... moist. Arguably the most urgent things I typically do are catch vomit (hopefully with a bucket) and help kiddos get ketchup off their inevitably new clothes and assure them that the washing machine will take out the rest.

That said, more serious problems crop up; we've had kids get nosebleeds, swallow loose teeth, and even choke. It would be great if we had first aid certification, because even with an emergency radio call, the nurse's office seems very far away and there's *always* a para wherever the children are. On field trips the nurse's office is even farther. Most of our training involves de-escalation and how to be helpful to classroom teachers, which is good to know, but it's far from all we need.

Lining the kiddos up for recess is a regimented task because the intersection of the bathroom and the recess doors and the cafeteria is a perfect storm of third and fourth graders coming in and kindergarten, first, and second graders going out. So every day, I ask my kids:

"Where are we lining up?"

"By the instruments!"

"Where are we putting stuff?"

"In the basket!"

"Where are we going after we wash our hands?"

"Outside!"

Then I wave for them to follow and we wait our turn to wash hands and go outside. The quiet one and the third rejoin us and we go outside. The third wants to go on the swings most days. I give good pushes on the swings, and for him I'll make up little songs about how high he's going, but I have bulging discs in my back and some days I can't even lean over to give a little push. If he asks, I can usually give him one good one, and I'll tell him as much.

"Back hurt, Webb?"

"Yeah, back hurts today, bud."

It's out of my control, but I always feel guilty that I can't do that for him.

This is one of those things I don't have the finances or insurance to adequately get under control and would make me much better at my job. I have a number of chronic issues that are keeping me from being physically well enough to do more than what I consider the minimum requirement of my job, and being able to afford meaningful treatment is largely beyond what I can afford. To say nothing of the fact that Elementary schools are effectively petri dishes. Children are still learning to cough or sneeze in their elbow and use tissues and not sleeves or fingers. I've missed four weeks of work and had surgery due to illness just since we came back from Winter break. I'm currently recovering from a bout with Covid that began circulating in second grade a couple weeks ago. I do not get paid for most of that time, so to say finances are trying at the moment would be accurate.

Most recesses, I referee the GaGa pit at the request of most of the regular second grade players. My rules are clear, my calls are consistent, the kids just have to play. They like not having to call one another out, or worry about cheating. I always do King GaGa, meaning when one kid comes out, another goes in. It keeps the game exciting and kids who wouldn't normally get to play get some

time to play. I have the kids, who are waiting in line, count the players and tell me if I need to put more people in. It's also a sneaky way to get kids who need practice counting to be able to practice counting.

What I'm genuinely proud of is that there are kids who take themselves out when they know they're out.

"I'm out, Miss Webb!"

"Good sportsmanship child, thank you for your honesty! Next child, you're in."

And since I've started praising this behavior, my job as the ref has gotten much easier. Kids who would normally be in tears at being out, hop out without a flinch. Whether this change is due to knowing that good sportsmanship is praiseworthy behavior, or knowing that the line to get back into the pit moves fast, doesn't matter so much to me. I'm just proud that kids are making the right decisions.

I usually have to give out some band aids at recess; I have the fun band aids so I think I end up giving out more than I need to but, flashing back to Maslow, sometimes kids just feel better with a fun band aid. Plus...I get to use them too.

We go in after recess and have about five minutes of mindfulness in the classroom. The hurricane desperately seeks sensory input during this time and I'm not sure lying on his back with the lights off is beneficial to his mindfulness. The third is with the special ed teacher.

I usually take my lunch after mindfulness. A bunch of paras do. We commiserate, talk about personal lives, troubleshoot things we've come up with during the day. If I'm alone, I write or check in with loved ones. It's the fastest half hour of the day.

I get back in time for math, usually around 1:15 PM. We're rapidly approaching the point in the day where we're all tired, overstimulated, out of spoons, generally low in ability to cope.

No matter how hard you throw frozen peas at the wall, they're not going to stick.

This is when most problems happen; it usually comes in the form of the third refusing to be compliant, ruining his work or using an iPad or Chromebook inappropriately. I take the equipment away, which makes him mad and he starts hitting me as hard as he can. I used to be certified to defend myself and utilize protective holds, as a last resort, in the classroom but there aren't enough trainers and my training lapsed in October. I was going to be certified again last week, but a positive Covid test means I am unlikely to get trained this school year.

I have a radio, and a seven year old hitting me with a closed fist sucks, but I don't want him to think that hitting me will change expectations or be enough to make me back down. So I just let my head go empty and repeat my directions. It's much easier to do the right thing when you're able to detach and be objective. And honestly? I've had worse. Over the years I've been bitten, scratched, punched, spit at, kicked, groped, and stabbed with a pencil, all by students of wildly varying ages. I

can handle a small child punching me, but obviously I'm looking forward to getting recertified at the soonest possible date.

"When you give me space and sit in your chair, we can use the Chromebook/iPad." I repeat this and quietly keep track of time. I try to use the "when, then" formula for all my directions. "When you do X, then you get Z." You build in the assumption of success. It's not "If," it's always "When." Unfortunately the other kids are used to these outbursts, and it's pretty common that they'll come and ask me if they can use the bathroom, despite the third beating on me.

After about ten to fifteen minutes, he'll get tired of hitting me, and go under the table. That is actually a good sign; he's trying to self-regulate. The dark, the slight noise difference, being able to curl up or stretch on the floor helps. After about ten minutes, he comes to the edge of the table and I sit on the floor. I let the silence sit for a minute before I ask him if he wants me to tie his shoes. It's how he knows I'm not mad.

And truthfully, I don't get mad at him, or any of the kids I work with. I get frustrated beyond belief, but anger implies that it's personal; that the child, rather than the behavior, is the problem. Children in this mindset are frustrated too, they don't want to act like this; they are learning how to interact with others, and they're at different levels of that skill, just like learning to read. This is the social emotional equivalent of being asked to read Tom Clancy when they're barely able to get through Dr. Seuss.

That's not to say the behavior is acceptable, but when you meet the child where they're at, you treat this behavior with a growth mindset; this is something we need to work on, they're not there yet, so let's think about how to get them there.

The third usually asks to go to the bathroom after I tie his shoes. This is generally the final indication that he's successfully regulated himself. He isn't allowed to go to the bathroom on his own, and the boy's bathroom has proven to be over stimulating so we use the bathroom in a special ed teacher's room.

When we return, we get the work done that he refused to do initially. It's easy this time; meltdowns are very much like being on a treadmill going too fast and flying catawampus off the end when you finally can't hold on anymore. So you stop, take a breather, maybe put on some band aids (hopefully fun ones) if you need them. But you get up and you start walking again.

That's the thing I want to impress on every kiddo I meet; it's okay to make mistakes, and it's okay to fall down. But get back up, hold your head high, and keep going knowing more than you did.

When it's time to pack up, I usually monitor the hall. The third and the hurricane have a *very* tough time packing up; all the classes are in the hall getting things from lockers; school is effectively over, it's very exciting. I remind all the kids of the time vortex causing them to age rapidly the longer they dawdle in the hall, and they laugh but hurry.

The hurricane and the quiet one are largely able to pack up on their own, though the hurricane needs to be redirected and informed when he drops things. Despite the flurry of activity, he's

exhausted; he can't pretend he can follow even simple directions. He's desperately sensory seeking, being loud, eating snacks, walking around the room, talking to people.

The third doesn't *really* need my help. But he likes it. He likes to be taken care of, on his terms. Some stuff I chide him and tell him he can do that; I don't love the idea of learned helplessness. But I'll zip his coat, stick his water bottle in his backpack when it's on his back. Sometimes he wants a hug before he goes, sometimes he just calls "Bye, Webb!" on his way out.

I hang out with my remaining fellas and the other kids while we wait for buses to be called. They get silly, which I encourage, but within reason. I strongly believe that children's imaginations should be like balloons; they're best when they fly, but much less fun when the anchor is lost and it floats out of reach. Sometimes I'm the string, sometimes I'm the helium. I want them to see adults who also have a strong sense of identity and imagination. Sometimes that means I lead a conga line of children to specials, sometimes it means I teach them how to make a square out of a rectangular piece of paper so we can make fortune tellers, sometimes it means surprising them with my knowledge of Star Wars, which turns into a reading lesson as I explain it's "Darth" Vader and not "Dark" Vader.

Eventually, the classroom is empty, and usually the Miss Webb character can be retired for the day. The classroom teacher and I decompress for a few minutes, laughing about the antics of the day, planning things for the following day, occasionally rearranging the classroom, and on a couple occasions crying and sharing a hug. My day is technically over at 3:40 PM. I put my walkie away, clock out, and go to my car. I hang my badge around the shift column in my car as the final parting from "Miss Webb" for the day.

When you're in a classroom with a student, or students, you become entrenched with those students. You become their first responder, their confidante. You hear and see things that teachers and administrators miss. One to one, or enhanced are technically my title, but I am Miss Webb for every kid in that building.

That things could be worse, doesn't mean things are acceptable as they are. Schools have always needed more help than they've gotten; this is an elephant in the room that has been trumpeted louder and louder in recent days. If it becomes any louder, it will be a stampede.

I *love* being a para. I love being in the trenches with the kids, listening to their stories, hearing the wild things they say, sharing my own random bits of trivia, laughing together, impromptu dance parties, finding myself out of breath from running around the cafeteria because so many kids want hugs that I have to run to get to them all. I love that my position with them makes me privy to information that they won't tell "adults," but they'll tell Miss Webb, and then I can help them on the spot AND tell the right people to make sure their lives both in school and out are better.

My innate skill, my knowledge, my creativity, my empathy, my sense of humor, my attention to detail make me SO good at being Miss Webb. I love being her, though I'll admit it's exhausting some days. There are days when I get home and just cry because a child asked me to bring him a birthday cake at his house because he isn't sure they'll remember at his home this year. And I don't know if he's

asking me because I'm convenient or because he knows Miss Webb keeps promises. Or I'll cry because another child told me about how much he loves his mom, and follows it up with "I wish she wouldn't tell me I'm the worst."

There are so many people who think the job of paras is to put up bulletin boards, or make copies, or zip coats. And I do that, but the job of a para has evolved to be integral to the functioning of a school. We are the boots on the ground, we are the first on the scene, we are confidantes, we learn of the secrets that would stay hidden. We are familiarity that travels between grades, sometimes from kindergarten to senior year. Those who have chosen this vocation have made this our career despite the persistent belief among the ones writing checks that it is not.

We love these kids. We have chosen to tend the community garden and grow trees under whose shade we may never sit, but we recognize the importance of clean air and fresh fruit. Some of us have done this in place of growing our own gardens, because...\$15 an hour isn't enough to have a harvest. And my health insurance doesn't cover fertility treatment.

And it's easy to say "well that's your choice, go work somewhere else if you don't like that," "Get a better paying job," "be a teacher."

I could find higher paying jobs; Target starts at \$16.25. Probably less emotionally draining and less likely to get me battered by children. And I admire teachers tremendously, but I am not a conventional teacher; building curriculums and organizing events and projects are **not** my strength.

And paras are essential to schools functioning. This is not a vocation that exists for luxury, it's been born out of necessity. Teachers cannot follow individual students, and respond to extreme behaviors, and take kids to recess and lunch, and still fulfill educational requirements for the entire class. This is the reason paras are needed; to ensure teachers can teach and kids can learn what, and how, they need to. I cannot overstate how disheartening it is that year after year the welfare of paras, who spend six hours a day ensuring these important goals are achieved, has become a role to auction out to the lowest bidder.

As of today, we don't have means of traveling through time in any way except forward, which means we will all be getting older. We will retire and the children in schools today will be the doctors, lawyers, and engineers of the future. I personally don't want doctors, lawyers and engineers who are worse educated in their formative years than I was. I want doctors who treat with compassion and discover new treatments and cures, I want lawyers who understand the letter and spirit of laws, and I want engineers whose airplanes and cars don't fall into and out of the sky. And that depends a lot on the attention we adults can give them today.

I could be so much better at my career if other people recognized it as just that. There is value in what paras do, and an unwillingness to pay for needed work doesn't diminish that value. Giving a competitive wage, adequate healthcare, professional courtesies, and opportunities for growth will not only retain the best paras, but it will also give the lost caregivers in the world a place to make a difference in a real and meaningful way.

I will leave you with one of my seemingly random bits of trivia: goldfish grow to the size of their enclosures. If you think of paras as small, they will continue to be small; admirably performing a job that asks so much more than it compensates, but at the cost of their health and financial freedom. Functionally a wash. If you believe in and support paras, like paras believe in and support the children and teachers of this state, and you encourage and make their health, security, and growth a reality, imagine how much more our schools and state could grow.

This goes without saying, but for the sake of removing any ambiguity, I urge committee members to support House Bill 6881.

Erika Webb
Gales Ferry, CT